

What Is a Thesis Statement?

A thesis statement is a clearly worded answer to a question and/or a clearly worded declaration of the view(s)/ideas a writer will substantiate, assert, or prove in a paper. It has a definite subject and an opinion. For example:

Question/prompt: Should our school have a dress code? Why or why not?

Thesis: ABC High School should have a dress code in order to reduce student anxiety about “fitting in” with the right clothes and to save families time and money shopping for clothes.

Subject = Dress code

Opinion = Should have a dress code for two reasons: reduce student anxiety and save families money.

A thesis establishes a focal point for the essay that follows. Often, audiences will anticipate a single sentence thesis, which will require you to use precise words to communicate your ideas, no matter how complex. Sometimes, you will be granted the liberty to expand intricate, complex thesis ideas into two or more sentences; doing so will enable you to more clearly state what you hope to prove. While a specific audience may determine the length of a thesis statement and its placement in the introduction of an essay, your reader will expect your thesis statement to clearly identify the argument you plan to advance in your essay.

Beyond simply defining the topic of a paper, the thesis—and by extension, the essay—should articulate an insight or position valuable enough to write about. Rather than simply setting up an essay that reiterates information already familiar to you and your reader, a strong thesis captures an insight or an approach to a topic that is unique to you and that is persuasively supported by the evidence and analysis that follow. This philosophical premise permeates the entire paper.

Example 1

Question/prompt: Discuss the changes in the character of Scout in Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

Weak Thesis: In the book *To Kill a Mockingbird*, by Harper Lee, Scout changes a great deal.

Commentary: The question of how Scout changes—exactly what the changes are—is not addressed by the thesis. While the statement does acknowledge that Scout changes, a claim about precisely how she changes is not included. The thesis is overly general, “safe,” but not yet “strong.”

Stronger Thesis: In Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Scout develops from a naive girl, dependent upon the ideas of others to shape her view of the world to an independent thinking individual with convictions of her own.

Example 2

Question/prompt: Economic development and environmental protection are often at odds. Identify and discuss one example of the conflict, including your attitude toward the conflict or a proposed solution.

Weak Thesis: The conflict between the logging interests of the Pacific Northwest and the protection of the spotted owl is one example of the conflict between economic development and environmental preservation.

Commentary: While the thesis does identify a precise example of the conflict between economics and environmentalism, as requested by the question, the thesis is not yet complete. Either the writer's stance toward the conflict or the writer's proposed solution must be included in the thesis to fully answer the question and capture the claim that the essay needs to advance.

Stronger Thesis: The preservation of the spotted owl pits environmentalists against loggers, serving as a microcosm of the ongoing conflict between individuals rightly committed to preserving the existence of the species that balance the ecosystem and individuals interested only in the economic and employment development of a small region of the country.

Example 3

Question/prompt: Early in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Hamlet states, "What a piece of work is man," and the play itself explores a spectrum of characters who appear to embody many facets of human nature. In an essay, discuss what the play suggests about the qualities that define human nature and the implications of comparison to a society.

Weak Thesis: In *Hamlet*, Shakespeare suggests that human nature is defined by a mixture of qualities, some of which hurt society.

Commentary: The thesis is not yet precise in its response to the question, nor is it complete. The precise qualities that define human nature are not yet stated, nor are their effects on society entirely clear. How is society hurt by the qualities that comprise human nature? That portion of the claim must be included to strengthen the thesis.

Stronger Thesis: In *Hamlet*, Shakespeare suggests that greed and duplicity are fundamental characteristics of human nature, contributing to a society that is ill-equipped to counteract devious, self-serving individuals.